

Summary Report on the
1974-1981 Archaeological Investigations
at the
Chesterville Site (44HT1)

INTRODUCTION

From 1974 to 1981, archaeological research was conducted at the Chesterville site (44HT1) by members of the Langley Research Center Historical and Archaeological Society (LRCHAS), an avocational association of NASA employees and their family members. The Chesterville site is located in the City of Hampton (formerly Elizabeth City County), on the grounds of the NASA Langley Research Center (LRC). It is situated on a slight knoll overlooking Wythe (or Brick Kiln) Creek not far from where it broadens into the Northwest Branch of the Back River (Figure 1). The creek and this branch of Back River were known as Old Poquoson River in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The site includes a stone house foundation, the ruins of a brick house, a brick kiln, and a granary and wharf near Wythe Creek. The stone foundation lies about 100 ft. north of the brick Wythe House ruin, constructed c. 1771 by George Wythe, a prominent lawyer, colonial legislator, and signer of the Declaration of Independence. The stone foundation house, believed to have burned shortly before the construction of the brick house, was probably Wythe's birthplace. The brick house was the principal residence of Chesterville Plantation until its destruction by fire in 1911, and should not be confused with the Wythe House in Williamsburg.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although the analysis of the prehistoric artifacts has not been completed, the presence of flaked stone tools and grit-tempered, net-impressed pottery sherds on the site indicates that the area was inhabited by Native Americans from at least the Late Archaic Period through the Late Woodland and possibly into the Contact Period. The focus of the excavation was on the historical component, but the presence of these Native American artifacts and the location of the site overlooking the creek and marsh make it likely that this was a prehistoric hunting camp, if not a habitation site. The prehistoric materials should be analyzed in light of the recent Phase I archaeological survey of LRC conducted by Gray & Pape, Inc.

Due to the loss of many of the county's land records, not all of the early owners of the land that became Chesterville can be identified. Practically none of these records before 1690 are available, except for some of the original land patents and a few repatents. Before it was first subdivided in 1808, the 800 acre tract that constituted Chesterville was approximately the same

as that originally patented in 1635 by John Laydon (500 acres), Thomas Garnett (200 acres), and Elizabeth Thompson (approximately 200 acres) [Patent Book 1: pp. 201, 345, 515]. Based on the limited land descriptions given in these early patents and some early eighteenth century surveys, it is fairly certain that the stone foundation and the Wythe house ruins are located on the land patented by Laydon. Although Laydon owned other property, it is likely that he was the first European to live on the site.

The 500 acre tract granted to Laydon was in addition to land he received as an “ancient planter” (those who came to Virginia before 1616). The existing records only say that it was “due unto him the said John Laydon upon a consideration expressed in an order of court bearing date the 29th day of February 1631”. Laydon came to Virginia on the Susan Constant in April 1607 and married Ann Burrows who came in 1608. This marriage was the first in English America, and their daughter Virginia was the first English child born in the colony.

John Howitt, carpenter, purchased 204 acres of the Laydon tract and repatented it in 1648 [Patent Book 2:p.138]. In 1691, Thomas Wythe I, great-grandfather of George Wythe, bought this 204 acre plantation from Edmund Swaney [Elizabeth City County Deeds & Wills 1689-1699]. The deed states that it was then rented to Robert Ellis and traces its ownership back to Laydon: Howitt sold it to Humphrey Lee (no date given) and Lee’s heirs sold it to Swaney (no date given). In 1695, Thomas Wythe I willed “the plantation where we now live” to his son Thomas Wythe II, but willed the adjoining 204-acre tract to his grandson Thomas Wythe III, the father of George Wythe. Since the stone foundation seems to be located on this portion of the Laydon tract, the related house is probably the 1726 birthplace of George Wythe.

Thomas Wythe III eventually inherited all the Wythe property, and upon his death in 1729 left it to George’s older brother, Thomas Wythe IV. George Wythe became the owner in 1755 when his brother died without issue. Although he spent a great deal of time in Williamsburg pursuing his career as a lawyer and member of the House of Burgesses, he did not neglect Chesterville, and indeed, it was his primary residence after the death of his first wife in 1748. In 1755, he married Elizabeth Taliaferro of Williamsburg and continued to serve in a variety of public offices at the city, county, and colonial levels. Wythe is on record as renewing in 1770 a 99-year lease on an adjoining 50-acre tract of land (Virginia Gazette: March 8, 1770), and he leased most of the adjoining land belonging to the Symm’s Free School.

In 1771, George Wythe placed an order with his agent in London for window glass, nails, and hardware for a new house (Norton & Sons, 1937:169). This is almost certainly the brick

house that burned in 1911 and survives as a ruin today. As seen in a 1908 photograph, the house featured a three-bay front, with an arcaded porch over an English basement (Figure 2). It measured 53 ft. front-to-back by 30 ft. side-to-side, with walls four bricks thick. The accompanying floor plan (Figure 3) shows the interior of the house as described in 1971 by a local octogenarian who had visited the house several times in the first decade of the twentieth century. Local lore attributes its design to Thomas Jefferson, a distinct possibility considering his relationship with Wythe and his interest in Palladian architecture.

By this time, Chesterville encompassed about 1050 acres including the lease lands, most of it in fields. Tobacco was the prime crop, but corn, wheat, and barley increased in importance during the late 1700s. Cattle and other livestock, and apple and pear orchards, were also important as sources of income. Wythe employed an overseer to manage the plantation, and during the Revolution while he was involved with the Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence, his Tory overseer, Hamilton St. George, spied for the British and provided supplies to both sides. In a 1781 letter to Thomas Jefferson, Wythe states that he needed to spend some time at Chesterville “to adjust [his] affairs left there in some confusion by the manager, who hath lately eloped”. When the state courts moved to Richmond in 1788, Wythe followed. As advertised for sale in 1795, Chesterville included the brick house, a large negro quarter, kitchen, stable, store house, and granary measuring 60 x 22 ft., at which ships of up to 60 tons could land (Virginia Gazette June 24, 1795). The first purchaser defaulted on the payments, and Wythe reacquired the property at auction. In 1802, he sold Chesterville to Col. Houlder Hudgins of Mathews County, ending over a century of occupation by the Wythe family.

In 1808, Col. Hudgins gave most of Chesterville to his daughter Mary on her marriage to Gabriel Haller. The plantation was surveyed in 1809 (see Figure 4). After Haller’s death, she married George Winder in 1812. When Mary Winder died in 1845, the plantation was divided and her son Levin Y. Winder became the owner of the portion that included the house.

The Civil War and the abolition of slavery heralded a period of social upheaval and economic decline in the Lower Tidewater, as elsewhere in the South. The Winder family fled Chesterville on the eve of the Battle of Big Bethel, June 10, 1861, later making their way to Williamsburg, where they would stay until the war’s end. According to an later account by Susan Winder, all the women and children in the area gathered that night at a nearby farm, from which they watched “troops of northern soldiers... passing the gate” on the nearby public road (probably modern Armistead Avenue) and could “distinctly hear the firing and booming of

cannon...until they came in such quick succession [that we] couldn't distinguish one from another" (Sue Segar, n.d.). After the war, the Winders returned to find the home "in a most pitiable condition" (Ibid.), having been ransacked by the Union troops. As with many other southern families in the period after the war, material property was destroyed and real estate was subjected to lengthy legal disputes. Many could no longer afford to keep their property, and many former plantation owners were forced into tenant farming.

Francis A. Schmelz bought the main portion of Chesterville in 1875 and gave it to his daughter Frances, who married Robert S. Hudgins. Their son, Robert S. Hudgins Jr., lived in the house with his wife and son until its destruction in 1911 by a fire that began when a kerosene stove in the kitchen exploded (Daily Press: May 22, 1911). Robert Hudgins Jr. retained ownership of the former plantation, renting it as farmland at least into the early 1930's.

The National Advisory Council for Aeronautics (NACA) had begun to acquire land in northern Elizabeth City County in 1916 for an "Aviation Experimental Station and Proving Grounds," which became Langley Field in 1917. As this facility grew through World War Two, NACA began a rapid phase of construction for its Langley Research Center on property formerly occupied by the Moorefield and Cloverdale plantations, located just to the east of Chesterville. Robert S. Hudgins, Jr. sold the Chesterville plantation property to the NACA in 1950, thus ending an agricultural tradition that had spanned more than three centuries. The first director of LRC, H. L. Reid, recognized the historical importance of the site and had the brick house ruins fenced in, but the existence of the earlier house foundation was unknown until 1956, when grading for a test track exposed a corner of the foundation. NASA employees noted the colonial artifacts being turned up by grading equipment and salvaged what they could, forming the nucleus of the present collection.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Archaeological investigations at the site commenced in 1974 with a shovel testing survey of the area around the two house ruins. While portions of the surrounding land had been disturbed by the construction of NASA facilities, significant amounts of artifacts were recovered from intact subsurface contexts to the west of the brick house ruin and to the north and west of the stone foundation. The artifacts and notes from that survey are on file at NASA-Langley Research Center.

The following spring, the LRCHAS commenced excavation at the stone house foundation, located approximately seventy feet north of the fenced-in brick ruin. Eventually, thirteen 10-foot squares were excavated there, exposing the eastern end and the northwestern

corner of a 50 x 20 ft house foundation oriented northeast / southwest. The coordinates of those squares are as follows:

1 -	N 287,280 - 290	E 2,615,750 - 760	(10 x 10 ft)
2 -	N 287,290 - 300	E 2,615,750 - 760	(10 x 10 ft)
3 -	N 287,290 - 300	E 2,615,720 - 730	(10 x 10 ft)
4 -	N 287,280 - 290	E 2,615,710 - 720	(10 x 10 ft)
5 -	N 287,300 - 310	E 2,615,740 - 750	(10 x 10 ft)
6 -	N 287,290 - 300	E 2,615,730 - 740	(10 x 10 ft)
7 -	N 287,300 - 305	E 2,615,750 - 760	(5 x 10 ft)
8 -	N 287,300 - 310	E 2,615,750 - 760	(10 x 10 ft)
9 -	N 287,290 - 300	E 2,615,760 - 765	(10 x 5 ft)
10 -	N 287,290 - 300	E 2,615,770 - 780	(10 x 10 ft)
11 -	N 287,280 - 290	E 2,615,470 - 750	(10 x 10 ft)
12 -	N 287,280 - 290	E 2,615,740 - 750	(10 x 10 ft)
13 -	N 287,290 - 300	E 2,615,740 - 750	(10 x 10 ft)

An additional square was excavated next to the fence around the later brick house ruin, to mitigate the damage that would be caused by the construction of an historical marker at that location . Because the excavators had no way of knowing how many squares would ultimately be opened, this fourteenth square was designated Square 101. Its coordinates are:

101 -	N 287,190 - 200	E 2,615,670 - 680	(10 x 10 ft)
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